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AUTHOR Aiex, Patrick K.
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ABSTRACT

Science fiction is a literary genre that can be used in humanities courses to discuss ideas, attitudes, ethics, morality, and the effects of science and technology on the world's population. One of the best examples of a "classic" science fiction novel which can provoke class discussion is Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World," written in 1932. In this novel the visionary Huxley addressed many of today's scientific and technological issues long before they manifested themselves. Huxley knew how to play on the human being's fear of dehumanization via the route of technology and rhetoric. In "Brave New World" all societal ills have been practically eliminated--it is a sad note that today's reality is, in many ways, worse than Huxley's fiction. The environmental depredation in the novel is better managed than in real life, and some ecological balance is maintained. In the real world of 1994, starvation, sectarian wars, overpopulation, and standardization of society are all problems. Sixty years ago Huxley issued a warning in the form of a disturbing yet entertaining story. (NKA)

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Reflections on Science Fiction in Light of Today's Global Concerns

Patrick K. Aiex

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Besides being analyzed in classes purely as a literary genre, science fiction (and especially "classical" science fiction) can be used in secondary and college humanities courses to discuss ideas, attitudes, ethics, morality, and first and foremost, the effects of science and technology on the world's population. Science fiction can also enable students to gain new ways of viewing the world and its possible futures. It can serve to bridge the gap between science and the humanities (Pecor, 1987). Even teachers who are leery of a genre with which they may be unfamiliar should jump in and try science fiction as a way of opening up student minds and imaginations (Harris, 1992). If a teacher is not really a fan of science fiction, it would be better to begin with a novel that is part of the literary canon and which is considered a great novel both in and apart from the genre. One of the best novels for this purpose, one that will provoke much discussion and allow for a variety of opinions, is Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World."

In "Brave New World" Aldous Huxley was a visionary who addressed many of today's scientific and technological issues before they manifested themselves. This makes the novel more relevant now for the

CS 214 144

reader/student than it was when it was written in 1932.

Science and technology, as Huxley predicted, is moving at an extremely alarming rate. According to the "New York Times" (1/30/94 and 2/2/94) "...computer networks are currently the nation's biggest craze... spurred on by an Administration that has made the electronic infrastructure a national priority." In another article (with a different byline) that also appeared in the "New York Times," working at home has not become as popular as was initially predicted, because many people working at home (with every technological improvement at their fingertips) experienced "loneliness." What an old-fashioned, outmoded concept!

The level of our technology is surpassed only by the debates that rage over its proper moral and ethical use (Postman, 1993). Ever since the beginning of the true bionic era, the late 1960s, when advanced bioelectronic prosthetics began to be tested there was a moral outcry. Many said that the mating of man and machine, even if it was technologically feasible, was ethically wrong. Today the work continues. White's blood, the Japanese-made blood substitute, is encountering opposition on the same ethical grounds as were encountered by those first primitive bionic limbs.

Huxley knew well how to play on our almost paranoid fear of dehumanization via the route of technology and rhetoric. His details in "Brave New World" of the little embryos progressing along their journey, and being conditioned for their predestined roles, can

provoke shudders of disgust and fear in impressionable readers. His almost cheerfully scientific discussion of Bokanovsky groups, and how many can be obtained from a single ovary, lead directly to today's arguments over sperm banks and surrogate mothers.

The novel's theory of "hypnopaedic education" raises memories of "back-masking" trials of heavy-metal bands like Judas Priest. The concept of eroding our wills, individual or collective, by subliminal messages is a frightening one to any human being, since most of us prize our independence and self-will above all else. Huxley's examination of a "standardized" society also hits a little too close to home for those who truly pay attention to world news. As violence and deaths from any number of sociological ills rises, many of us react with almost chilling indifference. In "Brave New World," this societal indifference shows in the masses accepting everything just as it is, and never questioning the inherent "rightness" of the status quo. For many, there is now more than ever before a hunger to "get ahead." It is almost an extension and growth of the "yuppie" philosophy of the eighties: "He who dies with the most toys wins." We can see just by reading the newspapers or watching the news that this attitude is taking precedence over the well-being of our fellow man (witness the current Tonya Harding-Nancy Kerrigan ice-skating controversy). In Huxley's novel this yuppie philosophy is given a socialist twist: "He who dies sharing the most toys wins."

Popular literature and art is currently undergoing a drastic transformation--mostly because one media company gobbles up another

media company with frightening rapidity. This leaves the reader/viewer with many choices but with formulaic materials to choose from. In almost any book or movie, the "formula" as plot is patently obvious. It would seem that our ability to grasp complicated plots and characters diminishes in direct proportion to how "advanced" we become. Or is it just that the media conglomerates do not want to risk losing money on a "difficult" book or film? That is not to say that culture is dead--even in "Brave New World" the art world survives, albeit only to serve the greater societal whole.

In Huxley's world, all societal ills have been practically eliminated. We find that everyone in his or her own caste is happy, and all their needs are provided for. No one is worrying about starvation or disease in other parts of the world, crime running rampant, or sectarian battles (such as in Bosnia-Herzegovina).

Despite the staggering catalog of ills that do exist in today's real world, we are making progress in eliminating them. This progress is frustrating, for it seems that for each world problem that we attempt to correct, two more make themselves known. We now know that the cause of many of the Earth's problems was chronic environmental mismanagement beginning in the early days of the Industrial Revolution. It is a sad note that our reality is, in many ways, even worse than Huxley's fiction.

Overpopulation is of prime concern today, with China, India, Africa, and Latin America having the worst problems. If the world's major

religions would agree that birth control is a good idea, that would be a start. If that were to happen, however, wouldn't that take us one step closer to making "Brave New World" a reality? Many "leftist" elites in underdeveloped countries consider birth control a plot supported by first-world nations to control third-world nations.

Starvation, a huge problem for many countries in Africa, seems not to exist in Huxley's book. Environmental depredation, intertwined with starvation and part of a vicious circle, is a very real threat in today's world. We are driving species of animals into extinction daily, many of which, scientists say, have not yet been studied sufficiently to determine the effect of their absence on the ecosystem. In "Brave New World," the environmental depredation was better managed---anenvironmental balance appeared to be maintained. While there was the undeniable presence of human shelter and artifacts, enough of the original ecosystem had been preserved to insure humankind's survival.

Nowadays, when our ability to create new sciences is outstripping the ability of our consciences to dictate how to use them properly. The first experiments in gene splicing that involved humans was the creation of bioengineered interferon for cancer patients using discarded fetal material and selected genetic engineering techniques. The morality of using fetal tissue notwithstanding, the issue remains that we are playing God. Do we have the right? Can we live with whatever moral and ethical abominations we create via these new technologies? For many, the answer is no, and for a simple reason. The

world has not forgotten World War II and Hitler's twisted vision of a supreme Aryan race ruling a Nazi-dominated world. The emotional echoes of that vision are still felt now, especially since the technology to do what Hitler desired is within our grasp without having to resort to comparatively crude eugenics methods.

And that is why I believe that "Brave New World's" descriptions of different castes of people, each one selectively bred using different types of stimuli while in utero is so repellent. It mirrors what one madman dreamed for the world, and Aldous Huxley predicted it years before it happened. The reverberations of past history and present technology are seen and felt in "Brave New World." It seems that Huxley was issuing a warning in the form of a disturbing yet entertaining story. It remains to be seen if we will heed Huxley's warning in order to avoid the "anti-Utopia" or dystopia that he foretold.

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